THE MOTHERHOOD OF GOD

May 8, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 15:12-17
Hosea 11:1-9

"It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms;... I led them with cords of compassion,... and I bent down to them and fed them."
-Hosea 11:3,4 (RSV)

I learned about the limitations of a metaphor in my first counseling situation, in my first church, in my first year as a minister. The language I used to talk about God in those days was exclusively and intentionally masculine language, mostly "father" language. I had recently become a father. In addition I had made a discovery - that many people make in their mid-twenties. Namely, my own father, who for ten years had seemed to me out-of-touch, had suddenly become very wise and mature and perceptive... In any event, it was fully ten years before anyone had even raised the issue of inclusive theological language, at least within my hearing.

I had preached a sermon on the fatherhood of God, and in it had told a story about a strong and gentle man who knew how to love. This man began each summer day sitting under a tree, drinking a cup of coffee, watching the sun come up and listening to the birds sing. In this man's neighborhood was a family that was a little rough around the edges, harsh; didn't seem to know much about love, or the rudiments of child care. It was their custom to put the little ones out at the crack of dawn, simply allow them to wander around the neighborhood and let them back in at mealtime. All the neighbors knew it and everyone looked out for the children. The youngest was a little boy about three, with a speech and hearing impediment. His first stop every morning was this man's backyard. They would talk a little - as much as a middle-aged man and a three year old deaf boy can. One morning the man's wife looked out the kitchen window and saw him holding the little boy on his lap, cradling him actually, rocking him... "That's what we mean by the fatherhood of God," I said, with all the authority and insight of my twenty-five years.

The next day a young boy of about thirteen came to see me. "You know that guy you talked about, and the little boy?" he said... "My old man ain't like that." And then he told me a different story - about alienation, coldness and verbal abuse, inadequacy and pain - the reality that he had to live with a father's rejection. And in no uncertain terms, the thirteen year old demonstrated the limitations of Father as a metaphor for God; I have not told that story again until this day.

Ed Huennemann, one of our ablest theologians, tells about the Kindergartners in a church school class his wife was teaching in Trenton. The children were learning the Lord's Prayer. This child, also a boy, stuttered over the second word: could not say "Father" and finally burst into tears. It turned out that his father was alcoholic and the child was regularly and severely abused.

The issue before us is the basic theological dilemma of using human language - which is notorious for its subjectivity, its imprecision, its limits - to talk about that which is a mysterious ultimate, without limits. The basic issue is that as soon as you presume to talk about God, you have - in that act - limited God, at least to the meaning of the words you are using. Every theologian knows that. Along came a whole world-wide women's movement two decades ago which simply pointed out a truth we should have known that if the only language we have for God is male language, we have ourselves a limited god, an idol, a masculine deity. If the only name we have for God is "Father," we have missed a great deal of what the Bible says about God.

The Bible simply does not define God in terms of sexual gender. As a matter of fact, many of the cultures around ancient Israel worshipped goddesses, fertility, earth mothers. Even the male deities in the ancient world had strong consorts. The gods were clearly male or female. One of the radical departures in biblical religion is that this God - the one and only God is neither - is not defined by gender specificity. In fact, it takes a man and a woman to express the image of this God. This God creates human beings - male and female and says "let us make them in our image." Which is to say that you don't have an adequate image, you haven't heard the startling biblical word about God, if your image of God doesn't include feminine as well as masculine attributes. The point is not that it is wrong or inappropriate to call God "father," but that you're missing something important, something startling and wonderful if you can't also, in some way, call God "mother."

We have to use metaphors. Paul Tillich suggested once that language is so limited and imprecise that what theology needed was a moratorium for a while on the word "God"... Most of us, however, don't think well without words and images and so we use metaphors. Metaphors tell the truth about things. Professor Huennemann says that when you want to address the reality of your beloved you could say: "You are 5'6", weigh 135 pounds, have brown hair, and I like that." Or you might try - "on the day of your birth all the stars sang about your loveliness." That might be a little closer to truth - at least to expressing your feelings.

The Bible uses male and female metaphors and images to present the idea of God. There are many, many more male images than female. No

theologian argues that God is 75% or 80% male. What scholarship reveals is that at the time the Bible was written, and in the culture situation in which it was written, male metaphors were more useful and certainly more comfortable.

So the Bible calls God:

Warrior - Exodus 15:3
Husband - Hosea 2:16
King - Psalm 98:6
Father - Psalm 103:13

but also -

Midwife - Psalm 22:9
Mistress - Psalm 123:2
Birth giver - Isaiah 42:14
Mother - Isaiah 66:13

[See Phyllis Tribble, God And The Rhetoric of Sexuality, p. 22]

I chose for a text one of the loveliest images of God in all the Bible, from Hosea.

"When Israel was a child, I loved him (them)
I taught them to walk...
I took them up in my arms...
I bent down to them and fed them..."

Those are clearly feminine, maternal images. I don't know about you but the person who bent down to feed me was not a father. The one who nurses, particularly thousands of years ago - as in the text - is a mother. Professor Phyllis Tribble argues that within the Bible, what is going on in history, has a lot to do with the images the people use for God. The God of the Exodus and wilderness wandering, for instance, is a liberator God; very different from the way the Bible talks about God when the people are reconstructing Jerusalem, rebuilding the Temple and settling down again.

David Read, Pastor at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, in a wonderful treatment of the topic observes that the meaning of "father" can vary widely depending on historic circumstance, as my young friend taught me twenty-five years ago.

"...the word Father conveyed one thing to an ancient tribesman whose father was a fearful figure with powers of life and death, something else to the friends of Jesus whose fathers were kindly providers; and something else again to the Victorians, whose fathers frown on us from gilt-framed paintings. And it must mean something else again to a generation raised on the image of the incompetent, bumbling clown portrayed in so many soap operas." [Unfinished Easter, p. 114]

It is interesting that the earliest Christian thinkers seemed to understand God's maternal as well as paternal being, and used what sounds to us like shockingly specific language.

Clement of Alexandria portrayed a maternal God and said that Christ is both father and mother to his little ones. The list of maternal allusions in historical theology is long and impressive. Even John Calvin alludes to God's feminism and maternal characteristics. To read all that is to ask "What happened?" which is exactly what feminist theology asks.

That's a big question. The short answer is that as Western civilization deepened and matured, the role of women became more confined, stereotyped and diminished. Hebrew culture was actually way ahead of other ancient cultures on the status of women. Jesus was a virtual revolutionary on this issue. Women were leaders among the earliest disciples and early church. Then as the church patterned itself after the Roman Empire and gave all authority into the hands of a male hierarchy, the general status of women declined, and so did any sense of God's femininity.

The issues of the status of women and language about God are closely related. There remain major segments of Christendom in which women are excluded from responsibility and leadership. The Presbyterian witness in recent years has been to challenge that and to advocate equality before God and the wholeness of the whole race. My focus this morning, however, is the way we talk about God and relate to God. That is, ordinarily, a language issue.

Let's look at it quickly... A committee was formed by the National Council of Churches to look at the Bible on the basis of gender language. That committee said what linguists all know. Namely, "Language reflects the way we think, and also informs the way we think." The Committee produced an Inclusive Language Lectionary to deal with the matter. It has been controversial. But the Bible, in its many translations, frankly does use gender specific language, sometimes when it doesn't have to. The Greek word "anthropos" may be translated "person." It doesn't have to be "man." So - "let your light shine before men" - can also be accurately rendered "let your light shine among others" without losing anything.

And then there is the pronoun problem. The Bible sometimes says God - he - him - his - when it is not necessary or even appropriate.

When the Bible tells stories they often only include the men. So in the Abraham cycle, for instance, the Inclusive Language Lectionary adds Sarah.

One approach, the easiest one, is to let well enough alone, not retranslate any texts: to take one's stand with the old timer who said, "The King James Version was good enough for Jesus and Paul and it's good enough for me."

Another approach is to cleanse the text of the Bible and our vocabulary of masculine imagery - which the Inclusive Language Lectionary does.

And a third position is to do a little of both.

At some point each of us must come down somewhere - preacher included: either use the old language with its limits, change it all, or change some of it. So allow me this privilege of observations and suggestions.

First, I believe it is important always to listen to one another: to know that there is nothing less sensitive or more arrogant than saying to a brother or sister - "You shouldn't feel the way you feel... It is inappropriate for you to experience oppression or exploitation." We used to try that with minorities... "We don't mean to discriminate." We do not dare, I believe, not listen or terminate the conversation because we don't understand it, agree with, or because it makes us feel uncomfortable.

So - when a segment of the community says we hurt because of the language you used, we must listen. A friend of mine was standing in church beside his daughter, mother of three, professional woman, loyal church member, singing Hymn 14, "Praise My Soul The King of Heaven..." One of my favorites. Each verse ends - "Praise Him! Praise Him! Praise Him! Praise Him!" After two verses, he told me, she simply closed the hymnal and put it back in the rack. We don't mean "Praise Him." We mean "Praise God" and it is not terribly difficult to say it that way.

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise **God** all creatures here below
Praise **God** above ye heavenly hosts
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost."

I, for one, cannot say Father and Mother. I cannot exclude from my vocabulary all masculine references - King, Lord, Father - for two reasons. One is aesthetic. At heart, I'm just as uncomfortable re-working the great poetry of the Bible as I would be allowing someone to clean-up Shakespeare in order to advocate a social or political position.

see Ann Fedler Ex L. bnl

The other reason, and the heart of the matter, is that the use of specific parental language for God really is the point. Browne Barr has a wonderful essay in a recent Christian Century in which he writes: "I'm trying to make room for the full personhood of God, inclusive language does sometimes diminish God's accessibility. It asks us to address God as a function. But as someone once reminded me, when a child falls down and is hurt, he or she cries out "Mommie," not "Caregiver!" - Carol Weis-Muth dyn

Barr says, and I agree, "To abandon God the Father in our doxologies in favor of God the Creator feels more like loss than gain to me." [The Christian Century, "Inclusive Language, Women's Ordination And Another Great Awakening," 4/13/88, p. 366, 367.]

The whole point, you see, is that God is not a function but a person. God's relationship to us is not mechanical but highly personal. That was the beauty and the miracle of what Jesus taught about God. God is a person. God is approachable. God is attentive. God is responsive. God has feelings. The best way to say that is "Our Father"... or "Our Mother." "Our Parent" - doesn't quite get it done: parent is one linguistic step removed from the intimacy of mother or father.

The basic theological issue is how does God relate to us? Does the fact that there is a God have anything to do with the fact that there is a me? When the prophet Isaiah tries to answer that he draws on the most vivid, most powerful and most loving image he can think of...

"But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me,'
'Can a woman forget her sucking child,
that she should have no compassion on
the son of her womb?'
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you." [Isaiah 49:14,15]

God loves us - more even than this strongest human image of love - a mother nursing her child.

That's the Gospel. That is what we celebrate when we baptize these dear infants. A God whose love is unconditional, intimate, indestructible, and will never abandon us.

Ellen Foster is the title of a new novel by Kaye Gibbons. It is a story told by eleven year old Ellen, who has watched her mother die, been abused by her father - before he drinks himself to death, attends to her grandmother through her death, and is passed among the relatives. Finally, after all that death and lovelessnes, through her own determination to have a home and a mother - she ends up in a foster family. Listen to Ellen talk with simplicity and directness about a very old and powerful metaphor.

"Wake up! It's time to go to school! my new mama yells. It is good to feel refreshed on Monday morning. Not like when you are in a job you hate. I sit up in my bed and flip the pillow over for the cool side. Sometimes I even say to myself this feels very good and I count up what I like about the way I am living now.

"Number one is that I do not plan to leave here until I am old. If somebody does try to make me leave I will chain my arms and legs to the bedpost and throw a fit.

"Number two and three is that I do not owe anybody any money and I can count on food to eat that I do not always have to fix or be guilty eating.

"And the best one number four is my new mama saying good morning to me like she means it." [p. 95]

So I never used that story about the man and the little boy again - because of who it might exclude. But recently I was reading an article that suggested we ought to try, we adults, to fill in the images which we use to give content to the phrase "Child of God." We are, we profess, children of God. [Weavings, "In the Circle of a Mother's Arms," Wendy Wright, Jan./Feb., 1988.] There is only one way to appropriate that wonderful thought and that is through our experience of childhood; either

what we had or - like Ellen Foster - what we knew so intimately because of its absence. Either way, that is how the Bible asks us to know our relationship to God. We are God's children.

And when I fill in that image I cannot avoid the story of the man and the little boy because he was, of course, my father. But now, happily, I add to that the one who loved, fed and nurtured me as well, and was there for me at the end of the day.

And I know something about the motherhood of God. If truth be told, when I sing my favorite hymn, "Praise ye the Lord, the Almighty" and I come to that wonderfully maternal image in verse two - the Almighty's wings covering and protecting us, unobstrusively, I trust, I sing it now the way it really ought to be sung:

"Praise ye the Lord,
Who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,
Shelters thee under her wings, yea,
so gently sustaineth!..."

Amen.